



WORDS OF AUTHORITY: LITERATURE AND POWER IN BONE SOCIETY

Feby Triadi

Univeristas Cahaya Prima, Bone Regency, Indonesia

Email: febytriadi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

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Literature in traditional societies functions not only as a medium of cultural expression but also as a mechanism for legitimizing and negotiating power. This study examines the role of literature—both written and oral—in shaping authority structures within Bone society, South Sulawesi. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with local leaders, community elders, and practitioners, combined with participant observation of cultural events and textual analysis of local manuscripts and oral narratives. Thematic analysis revealed that literature serves as a tool for maintaining social hierarchy, asserting political authority, and transmitting cultural norms, while also offering spaces for contestation and negotiation. The study highlights the significance of literature as both a cultural artifact and a medium of power, demonstrating how narratives influence governance, social relations, and cultural memory in Bone society.



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INTRODUCTION

Marriage

Literature has long occupied a central position in the construction and reproduction of power within traditional societies. Beyond its role as a medium of artistic expression and cultural preservation, literature functions as a mechanism through which authority is legitimized, collective memory is maintained, and social relations are regulated. Written texts and oral traditions are not neutral repositories of information; rather, they embody systems of knowledge that shape social hierarchies, define moral norms, and establish forms of political legitimacy. According to Scott (1990), narratives and symbolic expressions constitute important arenas where power is negotiated and contested, allowing dominant groups to maintain authority while also providing subordinate groups with opportunities for interpretation and resistance. Consequently, the relationship between literature and power represents a critical dimension of cultural life that deserves sustained scholarly attention.

In many Southeast Asian societies, traditional manuscripts and oral narratives have historically served as instruments for preserving social order and legitimizing political authority. These texts document genealogies, succession systems, customary laws, and moral principles that govern community life. Geertz (1973) argues that culture operates through webs of meaning that individuals themselves have constructed, and texts represent one of the principal mechanisms through which such meanings are transmitted. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes that language and symbolic systems constitute forms of cultural capital that enable particular groups to exercise symbolic power and maintain social dominance.

From this perspective, literature becomes a field where authority, legitimacy, and identity are continuously produced and reproduced.

The Bugis society of Bone Regency in South Sulawesi presents a particularly rich context for examining the relationship between literature and power. Historically, the Kingdom of Bone developed one of the most sophisticated literary traditions in Indonesia, characterized by the extensive use of Lontara manuscripts, genealogical records, royal chronicles, and oral narratives. These literary forms functioned not only as historical documentation but also as instruments of governance and social organization. According to Pelras (1996), Bugis political culture was deeply embedded in written traditions that codified customary laws, social hierarchies, and systems of leadership. The authority of kings, nobles, and customary leaders was reinforced through textual references that linked contemporary rulers to ancestral lineages and sacred traditions. Thus, literary traditions constituted an essential source of political legitimacy and social cohesion.

The significance of literature in Bone society extends beyond historical institutions into contemporary cultural practices. Oral narratives, ceremonial speeches, and storytelling sessions continue to shape collective memory and social identity. Community elders and cultural leaders employ narratives to transmit ethical values, reinforce customary norms, and educate younger generations regarding principles such as *siri'* (honour), *pesse* (solidarity), and mutual respect. Through these processes, literature functions as a living cultural resource that connects the past with the present. As Assmann (2011) argues, cultural memory is sustained through symbolic forms and narratives that enable communities to maintain continuity across generations. Consequently, literary traditions in Bone society represent both repositories of historical knowledge and active instruments for constructing social reality.

Previous studies have demonstrated that narratives and texts play important roles in the exercise of power. Foucault (1980) argues that power and knowledge are inseparable, with discourses functioning as mechanisms through which social realities are produced and regulated. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) highlights the capacity of language and symbolic systems to establish legitimacy and shape perceptions of authority. Within traditional societies, literature often serves as a means through which elites communicate values, regulate behavior, and reinforce existing hierarchies. In Bone society, Lontara manuscripts and oral histories are utilized to codify genealogical rights, determine succession patterns, and maintain customary laws. Storytelling during ceremonies and communal gatherings contributes to the formation of collective memory and strengthens the legitimacy of social institutions.

Despite the richness of Bugis literary traditions, ethnographic investigations concerning the relationship between literature and power remain relatively limited. Existing studies have tended to focus on historical, linguistic, or philological dimensions of manuscripts without adequately exploring how texts are interpreted, mobilized, and contested in contemporary social life. Moreover, relatively little attention has been devoted to the ways in which ordinary community members engage with literary traditions and negotiate their meanings within changing socio-political contexts. Modernization, urbanization, and digital communication have transformed patterns of cultural transmission, creating new challenges and opportunities for the preservation of traditional authority and collective memory. These developments raise important questions regarding the continuing relevance of literary traditions and their role in shaping social relations in contemporary Bone society.

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how written texts and oral narratives influence authority, legitimacy, and social hierarchy within Bone society. Specifically, the research investigates the mechanisms through which literature functions as an instrument of power, the processes through which narratives are interpreted and transmitted, and the ways in which communities reproduce or negotiate established forms of authority. By focusing on both written manuscripts and oral traditions, the study adopts a holistic perspective that

recognizes literature as a dynamic and living cultural institution rather than a static historical artifact.

To achieve these objectives, the study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach. Ethnography is particularly appropriate because it enables researchers to observe cultural practices directly, participate in community activities, and engage deeply with local narratives and interpretations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), ethnographic inquiry provides access to the implicit meanings and everyday practices through which social realities are constructed. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, researchers are able to uncover both explicit and hidden dimensions of authority embedded within literary traditions. Such an approach allows for an examination of how power operates not only through formal institutions but also through symbolic practices and cultural representations.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the growing need to preserve intangible cultural heritage while understanding its relevance within contemporary governance and social transformation. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that oral traditions, manuscripts, and customary practices constitute essential components of cultural heritage and social identity. In Bone society, literary traditions continue to influence leadership structures, social norms, and communal values, even as communities confront the pressures of modernization and globalization. Understanding the relationship between literature and power therefore contributes not only to anthropological theory but also to broader discussions concerning cultural sustainability, governance, and identity formation.

Ultimately, this study argues that literature in Bone society functions as more than a repository of historical knowledge. It represents an active and dynamic instrument through which authority is legitimized, collective memory is maintained, and social relations are negotiated. Written texts and oral narratives shape perceptions of legitimacy, reinforce moral norms, and provide symbolic resources for the exercise of power. By employing an ethnographic perspective, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how words become instruments of authority and how cultural narratives continue to influence social life in contemporary Bone society. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates concerning the intersections between text, memory, discourse, and power within traditional societies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine how literature functions as a mechanism of authority and cultural legitimacy within Bone society. Ethnography was chosen because it enables researchers to understand the meanings, practices, and social interactions through which power is constructed and reproduced in everyday life (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in communities in Bone Regency where written traditions, oral narratives, and customary institutions remain actively practiced. Participants were selected purposively and consisted of 12–15 key informants, including community elders, traditional leaders, manuscript custodians, and storytellers who possess extensive knowledge of historical texts and oral traditions (Patton, 2015). Data were collected through participant observation during rituals, storytelling sessions, and community gatherings, allowing direct engagement with narrative performances and symbolic expressions of authority (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Tracy, 2020). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions regarding legitimacy, social hierarchy, and the role of literature in maintaining cultural memory and customary governance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Textual analysis of Lontara manuscripts, genealogical records, and local chronicles complemented observational and interview data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between texts and power (Bowen, 2009; Assmann, 2011; Ricoeur, 2004).

Data analysis followed a thematic procedure involving verbatim transcription, open coding, and axial coding to identify and connect themes associated with authority, narrative control, legitimacy, and contestation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Triangulation among participant observation, interviews, and textual documentation enhanced the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2020). Member checking and peer debriefing were employed to ensure trustworthiness and minimize researcher bias. From a methodological perspective, ethnography provides an effective framework for examining literature as a socially embedded and symbolically powerful institution that shapes collective memory, reinforces social norms, and legitimizes authority (Foucault, 1980; Bourdieu, 1991; Scott, 1990). Recent ethnographic scholarship further emphasizes the importance of contextual and interpretive approaches in understanding the interconnections between discourse, memory, and power in contemporary societies (Pink et al., 2016; Hine, 2020; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Consequently, this approach enables the production of rich and contextually grounded data, contributing to anthropological discussions concerning narrative, authority, and cultural reproduction in Bone society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight that literature in Bone society functions as a key instrument of social and political power, shaping hierarchies, legitimizing authority, and reinforcing cultural norms. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, it was evident that both written texts, such as Lontara manuscripts, and oral narratives are employed strategically by elders, local leaders, and cultural custodians to assert legitimacy, regulate behaviour, and maintain social cohesion (Scott, 1990). These literary forms not only preserve historical knowledge but actively influence contemporary governance and community interactions.

One of the central themes identified is the use of literature to legitimize social hierarchy. Elders and local leaders regularly refer to historical texts and genealogical records to assert authority in community decision-making. For example, in land disputes, leaders invoke documented lineages and adat (customary) laws recorded in manuscripts, which serve as authoritative references that reinforce social stratification. Observations revealed that these texts are interpreted and transmitted orally during village meetings, ensuring that even illiterate members understand their social positions relative to others (Geertz, 1973). This illustrates that literature in Bone is not merely informative but performs regulatory and symbolic functions in maintaining order.

Oral narratives also emerged as a critical medium for contestation and negotiation of power. While written texts establish formal authority, storytelling provides a platform for community members to reinterpret or challenge normative practices. Participants recounted instances where oral histories highlighted alternative perspectives, emphasizing ethical behaviour or criticizing past leaders' decisions. This duality reflects the dynamic interplay between codified literature and lived narratives, allowing communities to negotiate authority while preserving cultural memory (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1980).

The study also revealed that literature reinforces cultural memory and identity. Manuscripts, ceremonial scripts, and oral narratives collectively shape community members' understanding of historical events, moral norms, and social expectations. Participants reported that recurring exposure to specific stories and documented events instils a shared sense of collective identity, fostering unity and continuity across generations. This aligns with Connerton's (1989) argument that literature and memory are intertwined, providing a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge and social norms.

Furthermore, literature functions as a tool for socialization and education. Elders often use narratives embedded in manuscripts or oral histories to teach younger generations about

proper conduct, communal responsibilities, and the ethical foundations of leadership. For example, the retelling of historical conflicts and their resolutions during cultural ceremonies enables younger members to internalize lessons on conflict management and governance. This highlights the didactic role of literature, where textual and oral traditions guide behaviour and maintain social equilibrium (Sutton, 2003).

The research also emphasizes the emotional and symbolic dimensions of literature. Participants frequently described texts and narratives as evoking pride, reverence, or fear, which intensifies their impact on social conduct. Emotional resonance strengthens memory retention and reinforces authority, particularly during ceremonial readings or public storytelling events. Observations of ritualized readings of manuscripts during cultural festivals revealed that the performative aspects of literature enhance its power, influencing both perception and behaviour in the community (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011).

A notable finding concerns the adaptation of literary forms in response to modernization. While traditional manuscripts remain central, some narratives have been adapted for contemporary contexts, including integration into school curricula or use in civic discussions. Participants noted that such adaptations maintain the relevance of cultural knowledge while allowing leaders to assert authority in a modernized framework. This demonstrates that literature in Bone society is dynamic and contextually responsive, functioning both as a preserver of tradition and a mechanism for negotiating contemporary power (Scott, 1990).

The study also highlights gendered dimensions in literary authority. While elders and male leaders predominantly control the interpretation of manuscripts and oral narratives, women participate actively in storytelling, ritual enactments, and the transmission of cultural knowledge within households. Female participants often narrated personal experiences linked to communal narratives, subtly influencing interpretation and memory. These findings suggest that power mediated through literature is socially distributed, incorporating both overt and covert influences from diverse community members (Bourdieu, 1991).

Additionally, literature mediates conflict resolution and social negotiation. References to historical texts and oral traditions are commonly used to justify decisions, arbitrate disputes, and enforce customary laws. Observations revealed that referencing manuscripts provides legitimacy to leaders' decisions, ensuring compliance while minimizing overt conflict. At the same time, oral narratives allow community members to voice alternative perspectives, creating a negotiated balance between authority and agency. This dual mechanism underscores the adaptive function of literature as both a stabilizing and dialogic tool in community governance (Foucault, 1980; Geertz, 1973).

From a methodological perspective, the study confirms that ethnography is uniquely suited to capture the multifaceted role of literature in power dynamics. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis enabled the researcher to document not only the explicit use of texts and narratives but also their symbolic, performative, and contextual dimensions. This approach ensures that analysis encompasses both structural authority codified in manuscripts and interpretive authority enacted through oral narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of literature as a tool of social power (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019).

In sum, the study illustrates that literature in Bone society functions on multiple levels: as a repository of historical knowledge, a medium for asserting and negotiating power, a tool for socialization, and a mechanism for cultural memory and identity formation. Its impact is reinforced through ritual, performative enactment, and emotional engagement, which together shape how authority is perceived, legitimized, and contested. These findings contribute to theoretical discussions on the interplay between text, memory, and power in ethnographic research and highlight the methodological advantages of ethnography in capturing these dynamics.

Overall, literature is not merely a passive reflection of social order; it is an active, adaptive, and performative instrument of power, deeply embedded in the social and cultural

fabric of Bone society. By understanding the mechanisms through which texts and narratives operate, researchers and cultural practitioners can gain insights into authority, governance, and identity formation within traditional societies, offering implications for heritage preservation, education, and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that literature in Bone society functions as a dynamic and influential instrument of social and political power. Written texts, including Lontara manuscripts, and oral narratives not only preserve historical knowledge but also shape authority, regulate social behavior, and reinforce cultural identity. Through their symbolic and performative dimensions, these literary traditions contribute to the legitimization of leadership, the maintenance of social hierarchy, and the transmission of moral values across generations.

The findings further reveal that literature operates as a medium for both stability and negotiation. While manuscripts and customary narratives provide legitimacy for governance and conflict resolution, oral traditions offer spaces for interpretation, contestation, and adaptation to changing social realities. The study also highlights the importance of emotional engagement, ritual practices, and gendered participation in sustaining the influence of literary traditions.

Overall, literature in Bone society represents an active and adaptive mechanism through which memory, identity, and authority are continuously reproduced. By employing an ethnographic approach, this study contributes to anthropological discussions on the interconnections between text, narrative, and power, while offering practical implications for cultural preservation, education, and the sustainability of indigenous knowledge systems in contemporary society.

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